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ASSIMILATION, HYBRIDITY, AND IDENTITY: A VISITOR DURING INDYREF

Evan Gottlieb

“If it’s not Scottish, it’s crap!” This catchphrase, made popular in the late 1980s by a Canadian comic actor (Mike Meyers) on an American sketch comedy show (Saturday Night Live), was one of many references to Scottish national pride I encountered while growing up in the small city of Guelph, Ontario. Most of the others tended to be less self-consciously obnoxious: We learned in grade school that Guelph was founded by a “Scottish explorer” named John Galt (although nobody seemed to know or care that Galt was also a successful, Romantic-era novelist; our teachers also neglected to tell us that Galt was unceremoniously recalled to Britain and then temporarily jailed for outstanding debts); the town directly to our north-west was well-known for hosting an annual Highland Games; we crossed Guelph on major streets named Gordon and Edinburgh; and “Highland Dancing” was a popular pastime for the local girls. One of my favorite Canadian bands, a Vancouver-based folk-rock group called “Spirit of the West,” released a song in 1990 called “The Old Sod” that summed up both the pride and the nostalgia of the Scots in Canada:

I’m a citizen of both countries,
And very proud to be,
For the thistle and the maple leaf
Are emblems of the free.
*Oh there’s none more Scots
Than the Scots abroad
There’s a place in our hearts
For the old sod.*

What was there for me to relate to in all this? As a Jewish kid whose ancestors had arrived in Canada from various places in Eastern Europe and Russia within living memory, I knew I had no claim to highland

dancing, tartan, or bagpipes. No matter how much I liked their history and traditions (some of which, in graduate school, I learned to identify as “invented”), or how many young women descended from the peoples of the Celtic Fringe I tried to date, I wasn’t Scottish and never would be. My own cultural and religious traditions seemed mostly dull and dark by comparison – the Scots celebrated their resilience loudly and joyfully, I thought, while we Jews did so warily and wearily. My perceptions of this contrast were amplified by the fact that Guelph in particular and southern Ontario in general were heavily settled by Scottish emigrants in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, whereas outside Toronto and other large metropolitan areas, any Jewish presence was relatively muted. Heck, Canada’s first two prime ministers were even born in Scotland! So like many Jews before me, I decided that assimilation was the best policy (not to mention the best way to keep dating girls named Fiona); I might not be able to lay claim to Scottishness, but I could try to be as Canadian as the rest of them. Only much later, when I was finishing my first scholarly monograph on the central role of eighteenth-century Scottish writers in the formation of a “British” identity, did I realize that post-Union Scots had engaged in precisely the same kind of assimilation game: If you can’t beat them, join them; but if you can’t join them, then construct a hybrid identity that you can partake in equally.

Fast-forward to the summer of 2014. My family and I were living in Edinburgh while I held a short-term fellowship at the University of Edinburgh’s Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities. My wife – who actually does have some Scots in her family background, since her dad’s ancestors emigrated to Canada from Perthshire in the 1830s – took our boys on day trips across the city and beyond, while I worked in my small office in Hope Park Square. We knew this would be an interesting time to become temporary residents of Scotland, but coverage of the upcoming independence referendum had been light in the USA and none of us knew precisely what to expect. Would there be crowds of competing demonstrators? Public forums covered nightly on the news? At first, beyond a steady stream of newspaper reports and TV roundtables, there was little evidence – at least from an outsider’s perspective – that a potentially momentous vote would soon take place. Through June and July, the Referendum seemed mostly confined to the corners of the public sphere, while the FIFA World Cup, the Commonwealth Games (held in Glasgow), and then the Edinburgh Fringe Festival appeared to occupy the public’s attention.

Even once the final phase of political campaigning began in earnest, however, we were struck by the ways in which the Scots differed from their American counterparts when it came to articulating political affiliations. When I met with local friends and colleagues, talk quickly and frequently turned to the impending vote; in public, however, people seemed scrupulously to avoid this increasingly divisive subject. It felt rude to ask locals directly how they planned to vote. When I saw interviews and debates on TV, however, I was always impressed by how well-informed the average Scot-on-the-street seemed to be about the pertinent issues; despite the intrinsically passionate nature of the decision – devolution had been in effect since 1999, of course, but this was a chance for complete national sovereignty! – the Scots appeared to be making up their minds quietly, with a high degree of practicality and common-sense. Were America faced with a similar kind of vote, I suspected that political conversations would have taken place much more frequently and publicly, with more intensity but far less logic.

The closest analogue in my experience, however, was not American but Canadian: the 1995 independence referendum in Quebec, which I remember watching breathlessly on TV, since only Quebecois residents could vote. Then, I cheered and posed with Canadian flags by the screen when the results came in: 50.6% to 49.4% in favor of “No” to Quebec separatism. Now, again voteless but almost as heavily interested in the result, I felt much more torn. The arguments put forward by those promoting independence were not only compelling but also inspiring; in their desire to rid Scotland of New Labour’s compromises and hypocrisies, the “Yes” side touted a vision of an independent Scotland that would be environmentally responsible, globally pacifist, and truly socially progressive. The “No” side, by contrast, seemed to have a far less positive program: driven by doubts fuelled from Westminster, they mostly stuck to raising the many uncertainties that an independent Scotland would face. Would Scotland have to go off the pound? What would happen to national research funding from the south? How much oil was left in the North Sea, and could an independent, environmentally friendly Scotland use it in good conscience? The “Yes” side sometimes had answers and sometimes had to resort to chastising the nay-sayers for their lack of imagination. “We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it” was good enough for those who truly believed Scotland’s best future lay down the path of independence; it remained to be seen whether the wavering middle ground could also be convinced to throw caution to the wind.

By early September, election fever absolutely gripped the country. Even so, what struck me was the extent to which all the bridges yet to be crossed (or left uncrossed) remained practical arches and not Brig o' Doons; outside of the official ad campaigns for each side, which both used national symbols freely, there were few obvious appeals to national traditions, invented or otherwise. The SNP appealed to Scots pride, to be sure – but even (or perhaps especially) Alex Salmond seemed to understand that what his side needed above all was feasible answers to practical questions. Was this in itself confirmation of the persistence of the archetypal Scots character, canny and prudent to the last? Perhaps. Or perhaps even the supporters of Scottish independence were wary of waving their saltire flags too vigorously, lest their vigor become vicious and begin to resemble American flag-waving after September 9, 2001 – or, closer to home, the anti-EU, anti-immigrant sentiments of UKIP. Late in the race, as some polls suggested that the “Yes” side was in the lead, the unionists appeared to grow desperate, offering concessions as well as stoking Scottish fears of currency inflation and EU expulsion.

I left Scotland three days before the vote. With my wife and kids already back in Oregon for the start of their school year, I had spent much of my last three weeks in Edinburgh holed up in our flat in Leith – the Brooklyn of Scotland, as a friend put it – working on final edits for a new Norton Critical Edition of Tobias Smollett's classic eighteenth-century epistolary novel, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*. There, a tour around parts of Scotland restores a family's health and happiness, but the Bramble family nonetheless eventually returns south to Wales, a country that currently seems content with its share of devolved powers within Great Britain. Would the Scots similarly choose to remain “at home” in Britain, or would they strike out to become strangers in a familiar land? At 1 a.m., on the way to the airport for my long trip home, the cabbie and I discussed these matters in typically rational tones. He was non-committal, as I recall, and could see the merits of both sides: precisely the even-handedness I admired in most of the Scots I met, talked to, and observed throughout my summer sojourn. Three days later, almost 85% of them went to the polls to decide their country's future.

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